

Music Understanding Faith*

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Abstract: Our experience can either disclose or occlude the reality that lies at the heart of experience. The various forms of artistic expression are privileged pathways to that reality, and of these pathways music, as the most abstract of the arts, discloses the real presence in meaning in an utterly substantive way. The presentation is built upon three theses: (i) that music puts us in touch with that which transcends the sayable; (ii) that understanding, in both its substantive and verbal senses, is the act of translating an object of creative endeavour into one's personal "code"; and (iii) that faith is that mysterious condition or habit in which one is, to whatever degree, and with whatever constancy, familiar with God.

THERE IS A DELIBERATE AMBIGUITY in the title of this lecture, *Music Understanding Faith*, so I should begin by saying something about these three words. For a start, they could be regarded as three nouns, and therefore the title could be read with two commas inserted to signify a sequence of three elements: music, understanding, and faith. Alternatively, the three words could be regarded as forming a phrase without any commas, either to read that music somehow unravels the mysteries of faith; or taking "understanding" more literally, and more suggestively, to mean that music is one of the elements which *stand underneath* faith to support it. The attraction of this last connotation would be obvious for the composer/Christian theologian that I claim to be.

There is, of course, a further element here, namely, the conscious echo of Anselm's famous dictum: *fides quaerens intellectum* (faith seeking understanding). Anselm's business was about grounding the demands and the details of faith in rational discourse. His was a search to make the truths of revelation patent to the unprejudiced enquirer. Demonstrating the utter reasonableness of Christian faith was his abiding concern. What I want to explore here is a more modest goal, but one that I think is no less seminal, namely, that music, as the most

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abstract of the arts “makes utterly substantive...the real presence in meaning where that presence cannot be analytically shown or paraphrased”.¹

I have borrowed that last phrase from George Steiner’s book *Real Presences*. Indeed throughout this talk I draw on insights and expressions both of George Steiner and of the contemporary Scottish composer James MacMillan. I’ll say more about him later. But Steiner’s earlier work, *In Bluebeard’s Castle*, is a good place for us to start. It is one of the most thought-provoking and arresting books I have ever read. The book is composed of four lectures which he gave in 1971, and is subtitled *Some Notes Towards the Re-definition of Culture*, a deliberate reference to T. S. Eliot’s 1948 work, *Notes Towards the Definition of Culture*.²

Steiner’s book makes profoundly uneasy reading. He says that nostalgia for barbarism can grow inside high civilisation. “It is not perhaps, the absence of heaven so much as that of hell which a secular culture finds intolerable. A post-culture is one that has learnt how to build ‘hells’ on earth, in politics, in the economic process.”³ He takes Eliot to task for the latter’s sanguine assumption that the works of high artistic endeavour will ensure a civilisation’s civility. Let me quote Steiner again. “Mined by *ennui* and the aesthetics of violence, a fair proportion of the intelligentsia and of the institutions of European civilisation – letters, the academy, the performing arts – met inhumanity with varying degrees of welcome. Nothing in the next-door world of Dachau impinged on the great winter cycle of Beethoven chamber music played in Munich. No canvases came off the museum walls as the butchers strolled reverently past, guide-book in hand.”⁴

Steiner is not anti-culture. Far from it. He is one of its most knowledgeable and articulate champions. Culture, by itself, cannot save the world, but without culture, without the forms of expression that spring from the quotidian and are transformed into products whose very gratuity speaks a presence beyond their human creator, the world is condemned to the crudely pragmatic, or the ephemeral. No, what Steiner is excoriating is not the vast and varied corpus of artistic creativity, be it the novel, the poem, the statue, the building, the sonata, but the lack of attention paid to these forms, the lack of the *deeper*

1. George Steiner, *Real Presences* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989) 218.

2. George Steiner, *In Bluebeard’s Castle: Some Notes Towards the Re-definition of Culture* (London: Faber, 1971); T. S. Eliot, *Notes Towards the Definition of Culture* (London: Faber, 1948).

3. Steiner, *In Bluebeard’s Castle*, Foreword.

4. Steiner, *In Bluebeard’s Castle*, 54.

listening and looking which, in the work of art, reveals the presence of another; Steiner would say, *the Other*.

Could I at this point, like a good Jesuit, propose that we now proceed after first postulating three theses to guide our reflection? These are the theses, considered in sequence:

- (i) that music puts us in touch with that which transcends the sayable, which outstrips the analysable;
- (ii) that among other things, understanding, in both its substantive and verbal senses, is the act (the art?) of translating – or paraphrasing, if you will – an object of creative endeavour, into one's personal "code"; and
- (iii) that faith is that mysterious condition or habit in which one is, to whatever degree, and with whatever constancy, familiar with God.

I

Our first thesis, then: that music puts us in touch with that which transcends the sayable, which outstrips the analysable.

First of all a caution: when it speaks of music, language is lame. This is easily proved. People talk about music in many ways. It can be described as "sweet" or "harsh", as "soothing" or "comforting", as "disturbing" or "incomprehensible". All these adjectives relate primarily either to physical senses other than that of hearing ("sweet", for example), or to reactions or responses aroused by music ("comforting" or "disturbing"). They do not, they cannot, describe music itself. Only music can do that. When asked to explain a difficult *étude*, Robert Schumann sat down and played it a second time. The best interpretation of music and its meaning is performance. Indeed music lives only in performance and in the focussed listening to it. Thomas Beecham famously quipped that the British don't really like music, but they do like the noise it makes.

As well as people who use various descriptors in talking about music, there are those, the specialists perhaps, who try to analyse it. They seek not to label the effects which music makes on the listener or performer, but to delve into the processes by which it is fashioned, into its architectonics, its constitutive matter, its manipulation and organisation. Here again, words feebly limp. Even being able to describe what happens in a Bach fugue is not to describe a Bach fugue. To give a map of where and when subject and answer occur, of the contours of the counter-subject, of what contrast is provided by the intervening episodes, etc., will provide you with a blueprint of the construction, and even some insight into the compositional process (Sir Donald Tovey's

analysis of Bach's Art of Fugue is a winning example of a critic wrestling with the genius of Bach's great work), but it will not give you the music. Only a performance can do that.

Let me now turn to my first example, one of Hildegard of Bingen's hymns to Mary, *O viridissima virga*.

I won't say much by way of introduction. Hildegard, a twelfth-century abbess of a monastery beside the Rhine, was a prodigious creator of hymns and sequences whose mystical quality lifts them from the purely functional to the level of works which transmit something of the divine communication which she herself had received in visions. The sense of the presence of the Other is quite palpable here.

MUSIC EXAMPLE 1: *O viridissima virga*, Hildegard of Bingen⁵

<p><i>O viridissima virga ave, que in ventoso flabro sciscitationis sanctorum prodisti. Cum venit tempus quod tu floruisti in ramis tuis:</i></p> <p><i>ave, ave sit tibi, quia calor solis in te sudavit</i></p> <p><i>sicut odor balsami. Nam in te floruit pulcher flos beautiful flower qui odorem dedit omnibus aromatibus que arida erant. Et illa apparuerunt omnia in viridate plena. Unde celi dederunt rorem super gramen et omnis terra leta facta est,</i></p> <p><i>quoniam viscera ipsius frumentum protulerunt, et quoniam volucres celi nidos in ipsa habuerunt.</i></p>	<p>O greenest shoot, all hail! You sprang forth in the gusty breeze of the petitions of the saints. Now the time has arrived when your branches break out in flower: Hail, all hail to you, because the sun's heat has caused you to drip with moisture like the fragrance of balsam. For on you has blossomed a which produced a scent for all the dried-up fragrances. And they have now appeared in full bloom. From her the heavens dropped down dew upon the grass and the whole earth was made joyful, because her womb has produced corn, and the birds of heaven have built their nests in her.</p>
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5. Sound recording: Hildegard of Bingen, *A Feather on the Breath of God*, Gothic Voices, directed by Christopher Page, Hyperion CDA 20039. Translation mine.

<i>Deinde facta est esca hominibus,</i>	Thereafter was there nourishment
	produced for humankind
<i>et gaudium magnum epulantium:</i>	and great rejoicing for those seated
	at table:
<i>unde, o suavis virgo,</i>	whence, O gentle Virgin,
<i>in te non defecit ullum gaudium.</i>	there is no joy lacking in you.
<i>Hec omnia Eva contempsit.</i>	All these things Eve did scorn.
<i>Nunc autem laus sit altissimo.</i>	Now let there be praise to the
	Highest.

Having heard the piece, now what words are we to use about it? One option, of course, is to say nothing, but either to play it again, or let the sounds we have just heard resonate a little longer. But since this is a lecture I will foolishly, and perhaps as a Philistine, nail a few words onto the self-sufficient creation that is Hildegard's hymn.

Firstly, some adjectives from our first category of descriptors. These choices can all be disputed, of course, but they are the words that I would choose to use, if pressed.

The music is steady and calming, with gently shifting colours. It does feel like being in a monastery.

And if I were asked to analyse the music I would say that the constant presence of the drone played by the reed instrument underpins the alternation between solo and group singing by three men who chant the text in the manner of Gregorian plainsong. The monody, in the Mixolydian mode, is composed of small units, some of which recur several times.

All fair enough as far as it goes, and some people may find it helpful to know how others react to a piece of music, or to learn how it was constructed, to know about the "nuts and bolts". But neither of these bodies of information can substitute for an attentive listening, to allow the music to resonate within oneself, namely, to set vibrating the strings of our own senses, to interact with the pulse of our own bloodstream, to echo in the inner chambers of our auditory organs. This is where deep listening occurs; this is where the possibility of transformation can occur. But only if we are receptive.

It's that word "receptive" that I would like to explore more fully now.

I have been busy these past couple of weeks with a musical composition for unaccompanied choir. The work is a setting of a poem by the Jesuit Andrew Bullen. The poem is called *Etiquette with Angels*. As the title suggests, it is about the way one might behave if an angel calls round with a message, an annunciation, we say.

Let me read the poem.

ETIQUETTE WITH ANGELS

An angel always enters from the left
and keeps its distance from whomever's there.
Through a window a tree may be present;
often the room is opulent and bare.

A vase of flowers is usually placed
between the parties – lilies are preferred.
Dress – informal but not too casual,
for an angel wears simple wings, like a bird.

Late or early, an angel appears on time
(there may be thunder, or a sudden breeze).
However long the wait, you'll be surprised;
without delay, fall humbly to your knees.

Men may gasp, women sigh or drop a book.
The angel speaks first: do not be afraid.
Though itself a message and a miracle,
an angel comes to speak what must be said.

Its words will promise difficult blessings;
so accept them with heartfelt gratitude.
If questions must be asked, keep calm, speak slow,
for an angel fluttered will think you're rude.

Angelic ire can strike you dumb for weeks.
Attune yourself to the music of the spheres.
Whatever the cost, keep your guest entertained
without knowing it; be music to pious ears.

Angels never walk away, but vanish
in a golden sky. Never leave before them,
for angels have their special dignity,
and miracles have their own decorum.

Andrew Bullen

The musical setting of the poem has been finished, and the choir is even now learning it, but it has not yet been performed. At the moment it lives in that strange land: a piece of music which is heard only in the composer's head. So I'm not going to talk about the music, but about the text. At its heart the poem is about being receptive. All the biblical scenes involving angels which Andrew Bullen drew upon to compose his poem have that as their common thread. Whether it is an annunciation scene of Mary and the angel Gabriel, or of the messages which Joseph received from the angel firstly to take Mary as his wife, then later

to flee with her and the child to Egypt to escape Herod's impending massacre, the recipients of the heavenly word communicated by the angel are presented as attentive and responsive.

In Andrew's poem the recipient of the angelic visitor – be it Mary about to receive the news of an imminent pregnancy with God's Son, or incredulous Zechariah, who was told that, even in old age, he would soon become a father – played attentive host to the angel. How could they not? The news they were taking on board was far stranger than village chit-chat. In both cases the angel had their host's undivided attention.

II

Let us move now to our second thesis: that, among other things, understanding, in both its substantive and verbal senses, is the act (the art?) of translating – or paraphrasing – an object of artistic creative endeavour into one's personal "code".

I began this thesis with the qualifier "among other things". Understanding obviously has fields other than works of art in which to operate; all learning, all experience is subject to the chemistry of understanding, to the witting or instinctive process whereby things, events, people are made sense of. To the extent that things are made sense of in one's personal language, to that extent can development take place, can intuition break in, often unexpectedly, can a base be fashioned upon which a life can be built. To recognise understanding in these terms is to allow it the meaning of "standing under", of being the floor, the ground upon which a human being, the human spirit can build.

But what happens when an event, or a person, or a thing cannot be made sense of: an exterminator like Pol Pot, a earthquake or a tornado that leaves a tally of hundreds or thousands in its wake, or the senseless killing of children in the Dunblane tragedy in 1996? "Understanding" as it is usually reckoned is mute before such data; there is no sense to be sought there.

This leads me to my second musical example. *A Child's Prayer* was written following the Dunblane massacre. Its composer, James MacMillan, was able to find a space in people's consciousness that, to varying degrees, was haunted by the images conveyed by our media, and chilled by the numbing tragedy of the raw fact that the killing had taken place. MacMillan did not choose a text damning violence, or even a text lamenting the loss of young lives. What he set to music seems a long way from the scene of the killings. Let us listen to how he *understands* what happened.

MUSIC EXAMPLE 2: *A Child's Prayer*, James MacMillan⁶

Welcome Jesu,
 Deep in my soul forever stay,
 Joy and love my heart are filling
 On this glad Communion day.

The two solo treble voices, seeming both connected, yet at the same time unconnected with the slow-moving chords in the lower voices, achieve a kind of suspension of time. Some words of the prayer stand out: "forever stay", and more particularly "joy" and "glad". These are not examples of a heartless irony; they are an understanding of a truth that lies both *in* and *beyond* the killings.

James MacMillan is something of a rare breed among composers. Not only are his compositional credentials impeccable (many composers can claim that), but his willingness to speak out about the spiritual dimension in music is less common. MacMillan was in Sydney recently to conduct the SSO in a series of concerts which featured a number of his works; he also delivered the Stuart Challender Foundation Lecture, taking as his topic *Spirituality and Music*. The small piece of his which we have just heard offers only a tiny glimpse into the world of his concerns. Let me briefly mention just three of them.

A number of his works reflect his deep interest, and involvement, in the experiences of the people of Latin America, and the understanding of the church and world hammered out in those countries by liberation theologians. Secondly, he is also a composer with a passionate concern for the traditional and popular forms of Scottish music. (In his 20s he used to play keyboards in a Scottish folk band.) Thirdly, he sets himself somewhat apart from three other contemporary composers whose work has attracted attention, and a considerable following, for the expressly spiritual nature of its content. The composers are Arvo Pärt, John Tavener, and Henryk Górecki. They are sometimes known as the "holy minimalists", not a completely flattering tag. MacMillan's beef with them is not that they are holy, or minimalist, but because, in his view, their approach to the holy is almost exclusively one of spiritual rapture, that their repetitive, incantatory writing produces a music that can sound quite beautiful and other-worldly, but transports the listener *away* from where they are listening. In his works, MacMillan strives to combine the other-worldly with the this-worldly; that the, as he calls it, "grit and mire of daily existence" is shown to be touched by the

6. Sound recording: James MacMillan, *Mass and other Sacred Music*, Westminster Cathedral Choir, conducted by Martin Baker, Hyperion CDA 67219. Text uncredited.

Incarnation.⁷ Yes, he's a card-carrying Catholic who has written a Mass for the Choir of Westminster Cathedral, and other pieces of church music as well as his large body of concert work. He is firmly planted in the real, in the truth about the world, in his ethnic history, and in his faith.

I have taken this large detour on MacMillan and his work because I believe that he and his music stand for what is most encouraging of, and most responsive to the search for the transcendent in our lives today. He is a strong advocate of the intuition that deeper listening leads to spiritual health. He goes as far as saying that it is in the act of listening, not the content of the music, that spiritual transformation takes place. Allow me to quote him a second-last time. "A lot of music is not meant for that deep encounter at all; it's meant as an accompaniment for eating or drinking or dancing. But when deep listening encounters music of deep intent, where the mind of the composer has worked in a very intricate and profound way and the music requires a sense of silence and sacrifice in the listener, then I think that interaction bears the greatest fruit."⁸

What he has sought to do as a composer is, I believe, the same as all of us, whether listeners, performers, or composers, are called to do, namely, to translate an event, or a piece of music that has grown out of an event, into the code of our own language. We are called, in short, to understand even barbarity when it occurs.

III

But the process does not end there. There is a third link in the chain of our enquiry, namely, faith. That brings us to my third thesis: that faith is that mysterious condition or habit in which one is, to whatever degree, and with whatever constancy, familiar with God. With this step we have now reached a vast field, and all I can hope to do here is to plant some tentative footprints on its surface. It is in this landscape, if anywhere, that words fail, notwithstanding the libraries of books written about this matter. My third example will, I hope, come to my aid. It's for that reason that I've chosen something which I myself have composed. Or at least I have composed with the unknowing cooperation of another. That other is the Russian poet Anna Akhmatova, who died in 1966.

7. James MacMillan, "God, Theology and Music", in Stephen Darlington and Alan Kreider (eds.), *Composing Music for Worship* (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2003) 42.

8. James MacMillan, interview in the *Australian*, 5 August 2004, p. 12.

She worked on her cycle of poems entitled *Requiem* chiefly between 1935 and 1940, during the period of Stalin's Terror and the "show trials", and more particularly, during the imprisonment of her son, Lev Gumilyov, in Leningrad. Because she judged them too dangerous to be written down, Akhmatova had the poems memorised by a number of her friends, among them Lidiya Chukoskaya and Nadezhda Mandelstam. It was, in her biographer Amanda Haight's words, "a time when a poem on a scrap of paper could mean a death sentence, [so] to continue to write, to commit one's work to faithful friends who were prepared to learn poems by heart and thus preserve them, was only possible if one was convinced of the absolute importance and necessity of poetry".⁹

In 1957, after Akhmatova had finished the cycle of poems, she prefaced them with this prose paragraph which gives at least one of the origins of the work:

In the fearful years of the Yezhov terror I spent seventeen months in prison queues in Leningrad. One day somebody "identified" me. Beside me, in the queue, there was a woman with blue lips. She had, of course, never heard of me; but she suddenly came out of that trance so common to us all and whispered in my ear (everybody spoke in whispers there): "Can you describe this?" And I said: "Yes, I can." And then something like the shadow of a smile crossed what had once been her face.

The scale of the poetry is much vaster than this immediate scene. It encompasses the waiting, the suffering, the deaths that the whole country knew all too well. The poetry is both personal and universal. Akhmatova speaks for all Russia, and indeed, as she wished, for all the twentieth century with its mind-numbing horrors and wars.

As a composer I found it more useful to employ the schema which the poet seems to be using in this cycle, namely the Way of the Cross, rather than a liturgical Requiem. The cycle is a journey through suffering, her own and that of all her people, through all the horror from which she does not shrink, but looks at, full in the face. To quote Amanda Haight again, Akhmatova "can face up to it because she has taken suffering to its limit and so there is nothing to fear. Whereas Pushkin still prayed, 'Lord, don't let me lose my mind', Akhmatova no longer fears even madness. She has passed through it, surrendered herself to it, to learn, miraculously, that all the props to which she desperately clung for strength were not strength at all and that when

9. Amanda Haight, *Anna Akhmatova: A Poetic Pilgrimage* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976; repr. 1990) 99.

they were gone and nothing more could be taken from her, she was stronger than she had ever realised was possible.”¹⁰ They are a cry for truth, compassion, and memory: three ideals which govern Akhmatova’s poetry.

As you can see I have departed from the procedure which I used for the first two examples where I kept my commentary until after the piece was played. For this example I would like to have my say now, and let music have the last word. It’s my hope, therefore, that you will then have an opportunity for that deep listening upon which I have been laying such stress.

Epilogue II. This is the final movement in the cycle which at this point has been going for about half an hour. It opens with a passacaglia, that is, where a repeated two-bar pattern in the strings supports the vocal line of the soprano soloist. The text harks back to the torment experienced by the women in the queue in Leningrad but is now extended to reach all in this world who undergo similar persecution. The soprano then launches upon an unaccompanied litany of remembrance, interrupted at various points by interjections from the orchestra, serving to underline the phrase just sung. This then dissolves into an elegiac march where the poet both takes leave of her fellow sufferers, and allows a monument to be erected to the experiences she and they have endured. With the final image of ships sailing slowly down the River Neva, the strings bring the cycle to a close with a coda that ties a second melody to the initial motto theme transforming its icy, impersonal character into something closer to human experience.

After the first performance of my *Akhmatova Requiem* in St Paul’s Cathedral, Melbourne, two Asian women came up to me with tears in their eyes. I was amazed that the story of Stalinist Russia could have had such an effect on two people who could have had no link to those events. “No,” they said, “it was not the story of Russia we heard. We are Cambodians, and what we heard was our history under Pol Pot.” They had “understood” the music.

The musical recapitulation at the end of my work mirrors the journey that I have taken with you in this presentation. We began by exploring what it is that music might be, how its irreducible language escapes all efforts to describe it or to explain it. It nevertheless can be understood by people, at least individually, and sometimes collectively, in a way that makes sense of an event, an experience, or even of another person. This “standing-under” is not something confined to religion, or to those who hold religious beliefs. It reaches out beyond the walls of our churches, beyond the congregations who assemble there. When non-

10. Haight, *Anna Akhmatova*, 106.

believers speak of music, they sometimes do so by referring to its power to change their lives. This in itself is an insight into its very spiritual nature. MacMillan, finally, "I think it is within the gift of the composer to act as a vessel towards the sacred."¹¹

I now fall silent.

MUSIC EXAMPLE 3: Epilogue II from *Akhmatova Requiem*,
Christopher Willcock¹²

Again the hands of the clock are nearing
The unforgettable hour. I see, hear, touch
All of you: the cripple they had to support
Painfully to the end of the line; the moribund;
And the girl who would shake her beautiful head and
Say: 'I come here as if it were home.'
I should like to call you all by name,
But they have lost the lists. . . .
I have woven for them a great shroud
Out of the poor words I overheard them speak.
I remember them always and everywhere,
And if they shut my tormented mouth,
Through which a hundred million of my people cry,
Let them remember me also. . . .
And if ever in this country they should want
To build me a monument
I consent to that honour,
But only on condition that they
Erect it not on the sea-shore where I was born:
My last links there were broken long ago,
Nor by the stump in the Royal Gardens,
Where an inconsolable young shade is seeking me,
But here, where I stood for three hundred hours
And where they never, never opened the doors for me.
Lest in blessed death I should forget
The grinding scream of the Black Marias,

11. MacMillan, interview in the *Australian*, 5 August 2004, p. 12.

12. Private sound recording: Christopher Willcock, Epilogue II from *Akhmatova Requiem*. Merlyn Quaife, soprano, Ensemble of Orchestra Victoria, conducted by Richard Mills. Translation by D. M. Thomas, used with permission.

The hideous clanging gate, the old
Woman wailing like a wounded beast.
And may the melting snow drop like tears
From my motionless bronze eyelids,
And the prison pigeons coo above me
And the ships sail slowly down the Neva.

Anna Akhmatova